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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL: BUYING SOCIAL CONSENSUS IN THE KRG

Classified By: RRT Leader Lucy Tamlyn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) cable.

SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (C) Government oversight over religious affairs and civil society organizations in the Kurdistan Region is cemented by financial ties that bind these organizations to the government in a client/patron relationship. Similarly, political party membership cash perks start early for those who seek to advance their careers through the party network. There appears to be little genuine enthusiasm for these social mechanisms among the youth, but few alternatives exist for advancement. The tightening of party/government control may be reflective of a perception of continued insecurity or just the consolidation and maturation of the political model chosen by the region's founding fathers. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Understanding the political and social environment in the Kurdistan region often involves "following the money." This cable looks at the government's relationship with and control over religious establishments, civil society organizations and students.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE KURDISTAN REGION

[1](#)4. (SBU) According to high-ranking staff at the Ministry of Civil Society, there are about 1,000 registered "civil society organizations" (CSO) in the KRG. This number includes community associations, non-government organizations (NGOs), unions and syndicates. Staff acknowledged that there is no definition of what constitutes a CSO, and that needed clarity on that question awaits pending legislation at the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA). (NOTE: "Social organizations" of the PUK and KDP (youth unions, women's groups, sports clubs, etc.) are not registered through this process, but receive direct funding from the Ministry of Finance. END NOTE).

[1](#)5. (SBU) Applicants for CSO registration are run through the respective Ministry of the Interior (either PUK or KDP, depending on the location). While government officials state that approval is fairly routine (with only organizations that have terrorist links being rejected), they also acknowledged that being a "controversial character" (e.g., having criticized the government) could lead to delays or rejection. (COMMENT: RRT knows of at least one journalist's association which has had its application pending for over six months. END COMMENT).

[1](#)6. (SBU) Once approved (and after a waiting period of six months to a year), the CSO may apply to a special committee composed of representatives from the Finance Ministry,

Culture Ministry and the Council of Ministers for a stipend to support the organization. (COMMENT: Remarkably, there are no representatives from the Ministry of Civil Society on this committee. END COMMENT). Stipends can range from \$1,000 a month to \$13,000 a month and are used for personnel, supplies and rent. Staff in the Ministry of Civil Society acknowledged that political connections determine the size of the stipend and that there are no standards to evaluate the application or suitability of funding. There is also no monitoring of use of funds. The staff of the Civil Society Ministry estimates that 90% of all registered organizations receive some stipend. Those that do not are usually working closely with foreign partners on implementation of projects and receive their funding in that way. The staff called these "serious NGOs" who were "actually accomplishing something."

17. (SBU) The Minister for Civil Society (a Canadian dual national and former NGO head) recognizes that his title is an oxymoron, and hopes that he will "work himself out of a job." In a meeting with USAID Director and RRT Deputy Team leader, he explained that he hoped to move away from no-strings stipends and towards project-based funding. But for the time being he has no authority over registration or funding. Rather, his ministry is working to promote training and networking for NGOs. He said that he hoped to organize NGOs into a "coalition" which would appoint representatives to be the formal interlocutors with the government. (COMMENT: This would appear to make it difficult for independent civil society voices to be heard. END COMMENT).

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OVERSIGHT OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

18. (SBU) The Ministry of Religious Affairs (aka the Ministry of the Endowment) funds salaries for all of the clerics and staff (down to cleaning staff) of the religious institutions in the KR. The Ministry has a payroll of some 14,000 people. Muslim mosques, Yezidi temples and Christian churches are all eligible for support. (COMMENT: we have heard that Christians use their own funds, but we have not been able to verify this. END COMMENT). The Ministry reports that it keeps a close eye on the operation of Islamic charities. The Ministry also runs the Islamic elementary and high schools in the region. In a meeting on September 8, the Minister boasted to IPAO and Deputy Team Leader (DTL) that he indirectly controlled the message heard by some 650,000 faithful on any given Friday. Questioned on the presence of extremist groups, he reported that there had been some problems with extremist messages being preached four years ago, but that this was no longer the case: "the Kurdish people reject extremism." He explained that the KRG would not interfere with Imams unless their preaching fomented violence, encouraged cooperation with Muslim extremists, or targeted other religions. (COMMENT: We heard from local staff that in a mosque in Erbil a popular preacher who inveighed against the government's efforts to discourage polygamy was replaced the next week by one who talked about the importance of praying for rain. END COMMENT).

19. (SBU) The Ministry recently closed two schools run by Islamic political parties KIU and KIG. Queried by DTL on the circumstances of the school closing, the Minister explained that the teachers were not certified, and the schools were teaching an extremist curriculum, creating a "factory for terrorists" and "advancing partisan politics." "We didn't want to have to shell them, like the Red Mosque (in Pakistan)," the Minister joked. The Ministry instructed that the 1,800 students at the schools be absorbed into the Islamic schools supervised by the Ministry which have certified teachers and curriculum.

¶10. (SBU) In separate discussion with the KIU Secretary General on the school closure issue, he protested that the schools were in fact "moderate." He complained that the KRG refused to certify the diplomas granted at these schools (although according to him the Baghdad Minister of Education would do so), causing problems for the graduates. According to him, the KRG had closed down the schools because of fear of "political competition," i.e. the graduates might become Imams or teachers rather than PUK/KDP members.

GETTING ON THE PARTY TICKET

¶11. (SBU) Party membership (either with the PUK or the KDP) is the ticket to success in the Kurdistan Region. Party membership starts early, with party youth groups and student associations. Party membership produces a monthly stipend ranging from \$25 to \$100 for university students. In exchange, the student needs to attend party meetings and be available for party tasks as assigned (and, needless to say, vote for the party). Enterprising students are able to move up the KDP student organization ranks and accrue greater stipends and perks. In a survey of students done by American academic Dr. Denise Natali, she concluded that 25 percent of party-affiliated students were "party loyalists," the rest were unmotivated, but went through the motions. If they weren't paid, interest would vanish quickly.

¶12. (SBU) Students are eager for other paths of advancement according to Natali, but face a system with few alternatives. The private sector is small and job creation miniscule; government positions depend on party credentials. In her paper on "Youth Attitudes in the KRG" (prepared for INR in 2008), she stated that "Kurdish youth may be highly critical of the KRG and the political parties; however, they affiliate with the parties for financial and professional reasons. Perks from the parties have become especially important for average families who have seen the cost of living skyrocket."

COMMENT

¶13. (C) These mechanisms of social and political control retard the development of an independent civil society that could serve as a check on KRG power. Party/government control has become more entrenched since 1991, and efforts to monitor government accountability and corruption are weak.

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There are a few positive signs. Some independent Kurdish media outlets report critically on the KDP and PUK and, in conjunction with national and international news services, help provide some diversity of information. The recent fissures in the PUK politburo were reported extensively and hint at ferment within the party.

¶14. (C) Still, KDP and PUK continue to resemble national resistance movements more than they do political parties -- focused more on confronting Baghdad, Ankara, and Tehran than devising and marketing policies to address the KRG's problems. The statist political model chosen by the region's "founding fathers" has more benign forms (Singapore, say), but most statist regimes restrict freedoms, choke off economic opportunity, and end badly. Consistent with our long term interests in stability and freedom in Iraq, we must remain focused on encouraging democratic development in the Kurdish Region. END COMMENT.
CROCKER